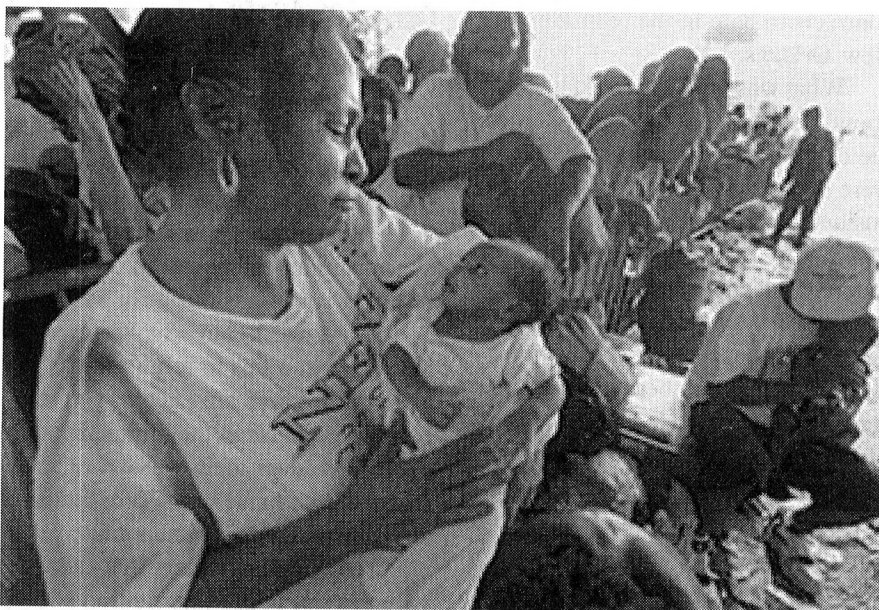


**katrina**

# A Feminist Perspective on Hurricane Katrina

by Loretta J. Ross



## Vulnerability of Women and Children

Many people could not escape not only because of poverty, but because they were not physically able to punch through rooftops, perch on top of buildings, or climb trees to survive. Horror stories of people abandoned to drown in nursing homes and hospitals emphasize that any disaster preparedness planning must take into account those unable to evacuate themselves. Instead, the mainstream media and government sources chose to blame the victims as if these vulnerable people simply made bad choices, ignoring the context in which these “choices” are made. Right-wing pundits are already saying that the tragedy was the fault of single mothers who were not married so that their husbands could lift them out of poverty! Those in power do not speak about the intentional chaos in people’s lives created by constantly scrambling for survival while living in poverty or with disabilities that leave many women feeling simply overwhelmed by life itself.

We also know that women’s issues will not be seen as “important” during the crisis, as we are advised that larger issues, such as maintaining law and order and securing the affected areas, are of higher priority.

A tragedy of this magnitude forces all of us to examine the impact of this storm and the response to it on women and children. The Deep South has some of the highest poverty in America, affecting all races of people, and the world witnessed that great dirty secret that is America’s shame. Black and brown people drowning in filthy floodwaters alerted the world that this country does not protect the human rights of its own citizens.

From a feminist perspective, there are certain predictions we can make concerning what will happen to

some women and children based on our collective experiences in helping women and children survive trauma. Poverty in America is not only racialized but it is also gendered. The aftermath of Katrina must be examined through a gender lens that identifies the myriad of violations experienced by women. A disaster like Katrina is a violation against the entire community, but when threats to women’s lives are not recognized, and steps are not taken to ensure that they are, women become doubly victimized—by the disaster and by the response to it.

**off our backs**

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There is a risk of too much focus on the current crisis, shifting dollars from previous unmet needs, and forgetting older crises around the world and in our country. For example, Mississippi already had only one abortion provider before the storm. Women traveled to Louisiana or Alabama for services. What will an already under-served region do to help women receive reproductive health care?

### **Redefining Military Occupation**

We witnessed a very authoritarian militarization of New Orleans during the crisis as police and the military were given permission to forcibly evict survivors, arrest or shoot lawbreakers, and impose martial law on the city. No one in authority questioned whether it is ethical to give orders to shoot flood survivors, even if they are supposedly looting. Many of the alleged “looters” were actually trying to find food to feed their families. Notably, while the police and military were protecting the property rights of business owners, they somehow neglected to protect the lives of women and children jammed into the Superdome and the Convention Center. Women, children, the sick and the elderly died waiting for help.

There are reports of massive arrests, police brutality and even deaths at the hands of the police and military during this crisis. Undoubtedly there were countless heroic actions as many people in law enforcement and the military risked their lives in contaminated water to rescue survivors. But as feminists, we should not confuse individual compassion with structural injustice. Both can exist in the same place at the same time.

Ironically, the occupation of New Orleans and the occupation of Iraq share one major obvious commonality. Both are greased by oil—its production and shipping. It is no coincidence that a port through which much of America’s oil flows is quickly militarized while hundreds of people die in flooded houses. The same company that is profiting in Iraq—Halliburton—will receive major contracts to help in the rebuilding of New Orleans.

What was particularly telling about the Gulf Coast crisis was that the owners of casinos and Wal-Marts were apparently able to return to their businesses much more quickly to repair storm damages long before federal assistance arrived to reduce the needless loss of lives. They may be the first businesses to offer jobs to the massive numbers of people forced into unemployment because of the storm. Will we be in any position to challenge their labor practices and impact on communities if they are the only employers available? Wal-Mart already discriminates against the women it presently employs. With President Bush relaxing the minimum wage laws for companies hired to rebuild the Gulf Coast, will more women make even less money? You bet they will because more than 400,000 jobs were lost in the disaster.

The concept of peace and security is dreadfully misused during this crisis to impose a police state. The reality is that women live in a borderland of insecurity all the time, yet the needs of women are invisible during discussions on security preoccupied with criminals and terrorists. Poverty, hunger and deprivation of human rights are the real threats to security because security is deter-

mined by the extent to which people have their basic needs met and can live in freedom and safety, not by the number of armed occupiers in their communities. A militarized community does not feel safer, just more policed, so that what is allowed and what is accepted is constantly determined by those outside of the community.

### **Gender-Based Violence**

Often poor women and children are the first ones forced into prostitution to survive. There will be an increase in the demand for prostitution created by the massive military and police presence in the affected states, similar to the rise in prostitution that surrounds our military bases around the world already. Women are not “opportunities to relieve stress” as many soldiers are encouraged to believe. Because of the limited real choices women face, we expect that there will be a rise in the prostitution and trafficking of women and children. We also expect that there will be a rise in the exploitation and sexual abuse of displaced children. Increases in the abuse of women and children will mean increases in unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

We have already received reports of the rapes and murders of women and children among the survivors herded together in the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center under inhumane conditions. We already know that some men do not know how to cope with a lack of control over their lives and they often express their frustration by abusing and violating women and children. Domestic violence and sexual assault will increase because women are

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more vulnerable and more men will become violent as the occupation and displacement continues.

### Development for Whom? Using a Gender Lens to Rebuild

There is a difference in how women see what ought to happen and how men see what should be done. It will be important during this crisis to listen to the women of the Gulf Coast and incorporate their perspectives on what should be done to help people recover from this disaster.

Women must ask critical questions during this crisis: Why were we so vulnerable? Who are the groups benefiting from the disaster and who are the groups hurting or excluded? This is a chance to connect issues of poverty, war, occupation, racism, homophobia, militarism and sexism, and make the distinction between natural disasters and man-made ones.

Some humanitarian agencies or groups will actually facilitate the occupation of our communities by turning over lists of undocumented people to the authorities, not recognizing the family rights of same sex couples, or participating in redevelopment strategies that ignore the needs and perspectives of women.

To counter this, women must make our concerns known in the media, to government agencies, and to the humanitarian organizations. There are human rights standards that humanitarian agencies should follow and most require that women's perspectives are respected and incorporated. We cannot allow them to ignore the voices of local people or ignore the voices of women demanding inclusion.

It may take as long as five years to rebuild the Gulf Coast, and right

now we need to demand that the services to which we are entitled—that are our human rights—are delivered with respect, efficiency, and dignity. We can use this moment to force bureaucracies to become more flexible, like changing normal admissions procedures to get our kids back in schools or demanding that quality public housing be provided instead of permanent refugee camps. We need schools, voter registration, immigrant services, drivers' licenses, housing, medical care, and public assistance put on the fast track, not bottle-necked services mired down in the typical bureaucratic snarls.

We need to demand economic redevelopment strategies that center on our needs, not those of casino owners. It will be mighty tempting to use this as an opportunity to not rebuild our communities in New Orleans or the rest of the Gulf Coast. New Orleans is particularly at risk of becoming a tourist mecca, where the only jobs available to people of color will be low-paying ones supporting the tourist and oil industries. We have to claim our human right to sustainable development. We have the right to quality schools for our children, jobs that pay living wages, communities free of environmental toxins, and opportunities to develop our full human potential. We have the right to reclaim our land, rebuild our homes, and restore our communities.

It is also predictable that the people who name the repression by our government will be attacked and we must defend the women who will come under assault. Women already get attacked even before we're in the public sphere, in our personal lives through gender-based violence, but

we can expect an escalation of these attacks if we loudly demand accountability from authorities. They will threaten to take away our children, deny us benefits, and accuse us of being unpatriotic and selfish.

Specifically, we must demand the full funding of services women will need to recover from this crisis. Of the billions of dollars that will be poured into the region, we must demand increased funding for domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, abused children's services, reproductive health programs, and services for the elderly, immigrants, and people who are disabled. We must demand that those doing assessments of what is needed not use gender-blind methods that fail to see the differences between the conditions of women and men and fail to meet our need to be free from all forms of violence, especially sexual violence.

We need to demand support for local women's organizations, which are arguably the best way to get information to women and obtain information about women's needs. Yet often women's organizations are ignored either because they are not known to the decision-makers or their work is not valued. We need the solidarity of feminists from around to world to help us claim our human rights. Ignoring women as a resource to help recover from this tragedy will affect the entire society for years to come. ♦

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